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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003963

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TAGS: PGOV SCUL SOCI IZ

SUBJECT: BAGHDAD 2 E-PRT: ASSYRIAN DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT
SPOKESMAN TALKS ABOUT CHRISTIAN ISSUES

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Classified By: E-PRT Team Leader Eric Whitaker, Reason: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (U) This is a Baghdad 2 Brigade E-PRT reporting cable.

¶12. (C) Summary: During a November 27 meeting, Assyrian Democratic Movement Public Relations Head Sargon Lazar Slewa told E-PRT Team Leader that the Christian community has minimal involvement in the Iraq central government. He characterized Christians as remaining non-aligned but open to dialogue with all. According to Sargon, Christians worship freely, their churches remain open, and they are not persecuted. He complained, however, that Christians lacked special IDs and weapons permits to easily enter the IZ. Sargon claimed that the Christian community had once numbered nearly as many as one million in the 1990s in Baghdad, and that a large number had departed beginning in 2003 mainly to Syria, Jordan, and Turkey, as well as Kurdistan, Mosul, and Ninevah. He discussed the current status of Christian churches, their NGOs, and their media outreach. Although one Christian-run television station closed six months ago due to financial difficulties, a radio station and a newspaper remain in operation. End Summary.

Sargon: Limited Christian Involvement in Politics

¶13. (C) On November 27, E-PRT Team Leader met with Sargon Lazar Slewa, Public Relations Head, Assyrian Democratic Movement, at FOB Loyalty. The Assyrian Democratic Movement maintains a small office in the Zayuna neighborhood of 9 Nissan district. This was the first meeting with Sargon, whom E-PRT Team Leader had met at the QRF-funded iftar at a Sunni mosque in Zayuna in October; Sargon had been a guest of the Sunni mosque community as a representative of the Christian community.

¶14. (C) Sargon said only two members of the Council of Representatives (CoR) - Unadem Yousef Kana, Al Rafdeen List (Secretary General of the Assyrian Democratic Movement) and Ablahad Ephraim Sawa, Kurdistan Coalition (Secretary General of the Democratic United Kildanian Party) - are Christian. He noted that Kana identifies more with the Kurdish community than the Christian community. In PM Maliki's Cabinet, Minister of Industry Fawzi El-Hariri (Kurdistan Coalition) and Ms. Wijdan Mikhail, Minister of Human Rights (independent member from the Iraqi National list) Ayad Alawi list) are Christian. According to Sargon, El-Hariri is more closely aligned with the Kurdish community, and Mikhail associates closely with a Shia political faction. He explained that Christians often avoid being identified too closely with any single political leaning to maintain good relations with all

groups.

Christians not Persecuted; but Community Depleted

15. (C) Sargon said Christians can worship freely in Baghdad and do not/not suffer from persecution by the GOI, Shias, or others. Furthermore, all Christian churches remain open. He said the largest Christian groups were the Chaldean Catholics, Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Eastern Church, Old Eastern Church, Armenian Orthodox, and Protestants. There are very few Christian schools, however. He complained that Christians lacked the proper IDs and weapons permits that would allow them to enter the IZ easily.

16. (C) Sargon said that in the 1990s the Christian community in Baghdad reached roughly one million. However, this number dropped significantly starting in 2003 due to the post-Saddam Hussein ethno-sectarian conflict. In Mualameen, 9 Nissan, he said, there were 5,000 Christian families in 1991, which decreased to 4,000 in 2003 and 2,000 today. Most fled to Syria, with a few in Kurdistan, Mosul, and Ninevah, as well as Jordan and Turkey.

Christian TV Closed; Radio, and Newspaper Remain

17. (C) The Christian community formerly operated a television station, which closed six months ago due to funding shortfalls. Sargon said that both the Christian-run radio station newspaper) Bahra, meaning "light") are still operating. He mentioned that the Christian community receives assistance from the U.S. Embassy, but complained that Coalition Forces no longer purchased advertising space, making it more difficult to generate revenue to cover operating expenses.

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18. (C) Sargon also said that his movement had founded an NGO and a women's center. E-PRT Team Leader encouraged him to advise the E-PRT as to their activities and to consider applying for resources to strengthen their capacity.

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